which support the electric candelabra were given to the church in 1957 and came from Lockinge House, Berkshire.

For well over a century there was no organ. In 1822 an instrument was provided by public subscription at a cost of £300. Built by J C Bishop, and later enlarged, it was badly damaged during the war and was replaced by a new instrument by N P Mander Ltd. The carved oak front of the case dates from 1717 and comes from the church of All Hallows, Bread Street, which was demolished in 1877. The small west gallery was once used by the boys of Merchant Taylors' School which stood in Suffolk Lane until 1875.

At the north-west corner stands the bell tower, of red brick with stone quoins like the rest of the church. It is surmounted by a graceful, slender, lead-covered spire, and contains one bell dated 1675.

Under the City of London Guild Churches Act of 1952, St Mary ceased to be a parish church, and its territorial parish was joined to that of St Stephen Walbrook. In consequence the Rector's title has been changed to Vicar of the Guild Church.

The church is now the home of the
Friends of the City Churches
020 7626 1555
www. london-city-churches.org.uk
contact_us@london-city-churches.org.

July 2014

The Pelican in her Piety from the reredos by Grinling Gibbons

ST MARY ABCHURCH
in the City of London

The home of

THE FRIENDS OF THE CITY CHURCHES

A church stood on this site in the 12th century, but no details of its construction survive. Even the derivation of the name Abchurch is uncertain; it may commemorate some forgotten founder or benefactor called Abba, or it may derive from Upchurch, as the name is sometimes found spelled in early documents. If so, it may have been the church up the hill across the river, founded by the Prior and Convent of St Mary Overie, now Southwark Cathedral, who, until the middle of the 15th century, were the patrons of the living. 'Robert the priest of Habechirce' is mentioned in a 12th century deed, but the list of rectors proper does not begin until 'Luke the Supervisor' in 1323.

The mediaeval St Mary's consisted of a nave, two aisles and a bell tower, and was described as 'a fair church'; but in the Great Fire of 1666 the church was burnt down. Three pieces of altar plate, including an exquisitely worked silver-gilt chalice of 1581, and the registers dating from 1538, are all that survive, apart from a vaulted crypt under the churchyard.

As in our own day, reconstruction was a long process, and so in 1674 the parish erected a temporary church or 'tabernacle' in the ruins. From this the altar table has survived, and now stands at the end of the south aisle.

In 1681 work was begun on the present building, designed by Sir Christopher Wren, and it was completed five years later. Except for the removal of the box pews in the 19th century, when the present low nave pews, choir stalls and altar rails were installed, and a few monuments of various dates, the church has changed very little in appearance since 1686. The ruins of the old church were cleared away, and Wren, who was at the time experimenting with domes, designed for St Mary's a dome that is an architectural tour de force, for he so collected the stresses that the large dome, over forty feet across, has no external thrusts, but stands on four plain brick walls without the need of any buttresses. The cost of its rebuilding then amounted to £4,922 2s. 4d.

The dome painting was added in 1708 when the church was 'repaired and beautified', and, though it has often been attributed to Sir James Thornhill who painted the dome of St Paul's, was in fact the work of a parishioner, William Snow, Citizen and Painter Stainer, who received £170 for his work. Though very badly damaged in 1940, it has since been most skillfully repaired and cleaned. It depicts the worship of heaven; in the centre is the Divine Name in Hebrew characters surrounded by rays of glory with worshipping figures of angels and cherubs beneath. In the lower course below the painted cornice are seated figures emblematic of Christian virtues and graces.

The chief glory of the church, which has been described as a 'treasury of seventeenth century art' is, undoubtedly, its woodwork. The magnificent reredos with its limewood carving by Grinling Gibbons is unique in that it is not only the largest but the only authenticated work of his in any City church (St Paul's Cathedral excepted), and his receipts are still among the parish records, now in the Guildhall Library. Many of the best craftsmen of the day, gathered together by Wren for the stupendous task of rebuilding the City, worked at St Mary's. The pulpit was made by William Grey, and the door cases, font cover and rails, Royal Arms and Lion and Unicorn were carved by William Emmett. The original high pews remain on three sides of the church; beneath those on the south side there used to be some cupboards or kennels, supposedly to enable worshippers to bring their dogs with them at service time. These were not replaced in the restoration, but were a unique feature of the church.

There is a well-carved memorial to Sir Patience Ward, Lord Mayor in 1680, and two tablets on the north wall carved by Sanders Oliver, a mason in Cannon Street. Some interesting floor slabs were uncovered at the last restoration.

The font was made by William Kempster, whose brother Christopher was the master mason responsible for all the stonework of the church and for the carved cherubs over the windows outside. The gilded *Pelican in her piety* appears both on the reredos and in the original copper weathervane (by Robert Bird) which was taken down as unsafe in 1764 and is now above the north door. This emblem was a favourite subject of the period, and is here doubly appropriate as being the badge of the patrons of the living Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. St Laurence Pountney, a church on the opposite side of Cannon Street which was not rebuilt after the Great Fire, had been served by a Corpus Christi College nearby, and had also held the advowson of St Mary Abchurch. At the dissolution of the monasteries the advowson had passed to the Crown, but in Queen Elizabeth's time, through the good offices of Matthew Parker, Archbishop of Canterbury, this was transferred to Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, of which he had been Master, and has remained in their hands ever since.

On the two front pews are wrought iron sword-rests to support the civic sword when the Lord Mayor attends a service in state. They carry the arms of two Lord Mayors who were also parishioners, Samuel Birch (1814) and George Scholey (1812). The former has also the royal arms of George III, and those of the Cooks' Company, and both bear representations of the City arms and the civic sword, mace and cap of estate. The mahogany columns